

MARTINA VERCESI

Revelation 19–21  
in the Exegesis of Early  
Christian Roman Africa

*History of Biblical Exegesis*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Editors

Mark Elliott, Jennie Grillo, Michael Legaspi,  
David Lincicum and Benjamin Schliesser

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Mohr Siebeck

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*To Remo  
with endless gratitude*



## Preface

This book stands as the culmination of my PhD journey at the University of St Andrews. I was a Master's student when, during the SBL International Meeting of 2017, held in Berlin, I met Mark Elliott who later became my supervisor. I was resolute on the project I wanted to pursue for the PhD. I started research into the New Testament during my Bachelor's degree with textual criticism of the Synoptic Gospels (the gospel of Mark, in particular). However, I was equally intrigued by the influence of eschatology on early Christian thought. Consequently, I proposed to my supervisor an investigation into the exegesis of the book of Revelation as interpreted by North African Christian authors. Given the vast scope of this topic, it became evident that in three years I would only scratch the surface. Thus, I decided to concentrate on three specific chapters, those concerning the millennium and the New Jerusalem, where the book reaches its eschatological climax.

The three years of the PhD were intense; I made my first move outside Italy, a significant life change. All of this was further compounded by the unexpected challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the hurdles, I am very grateful for the opportunity to have met numerous remarkable people during this journey. Among them, I must extend my profound gratitude to Mark, who believed in me and my project. Mark has been an exceptional supervisor, always available to discuss my ideas and always supportive of all the activities I undertook during my PhD. His competence was instrumental in my academic development, and his unwavering support continues to be invaluable. Mark's guidance and mentorship also assisted me in navigating the complexities of the UK research landscape and harmonising it with my Italian heritage. I am also grateful to Johan Leemans and Timothy Lang for their insightful feedback on this research; I could not have asked for a better viva committee.

Gratitude extends to the University of St Andrews and the people I encountered there. Special mentions go to all the colleagues with whom I shared my PhD path, especially Ethan Johnson and Taylor Gray, who became close friends, enriching my academic and personal life. I am also greatly thankful to my colleagues at the University of Glasgow. Special thanks go to Garrick Allen, whose consistent encouragement and valuable suggestions played a pivotal role in my academic development. Garrick has been a steadfast support, consistently making himself available and standing by me as I pursue various initiatives. His presence has been precious, and I appreciate his ongoing support.



I am also indebted to Kim Fowler and Kelsie Rodenbiker, who consistently devoted their time to revising my drafts, evolving from colleagues to become cherished friends. My warm appreciation extends to all the people I met in Scotland, who made me feel at home in this country.

This book is dedicated to Remo Cacitti, who passed away in March 2023. When I started university, Remo was one of the few professors specialising in early Christian literature, and I sought him out to learn more about this intriguing world. This marked the beginning of my research journey within the Università degli Studi di Milano's research group, now under the guidance of Gabriele Pelizzari. Remo imparted numerous lessons, but above all, he showed me the essence of being a researcher, highlighting the significance of curiosity, humility, and upholding our human values in all our research endeavours. Remo dedicated much of his research to the study of North African Christianity, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss this study with him and learn from him. He was a mentor and a source of inspiration to me, and I consider myself fortunate to have crossed paths with him. I hope I can return at least a part of the generosity that Remo gave to me in my life. Gabriele welcomed me into his group with generosity, teaching me the value of dedication, passion, and the importance of being part of a research group. I extend my heartfelt thanks to him for allowing me to continue being a part of and collaborating with the School of Milan. I could never thank Remo and Gabriele enough for what they gave me during these years. Without them, I do not know what I would be, but certainly not a researcher.

I would like to express my gratitude to the collaborators of the Milan School, with a special mention to Anna Pessina and Stefano De Feo, colleagues and friends, with whom I shared (and continue to share) innumerable conversations, concerns, deadline rushes, laughs, and a lot of good times. Another note of thanks goes to Carlo, my patient friend, who kindly agreed to help me with the English language and with whom I have had many inspiring conversations. I am also indebted to the generous support of the Biblioteca Giuseppe Dossetti (Bologna), which provided all the scans I needed during the challenging times of the pandemic. Last, but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to the editorial staff of Mohr Siebeck, who have diligently and meticulously overseen the processing of this manuscript for publication.

Many people have played a significant role in supporting my work and my life outside of it. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my parents, my sister Cecilia, my brother Stefano, and my friends. Your unwavering presence in my life, your love, and your appreciation means everything to me. Thank you all for being there with me.

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
ANTF	Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ASE</i>	<i>Annali di Scienze Religiose</i>
<i>AugStud</i>	<i>Augustinian Studies</i>
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
CH	Church History
<i>CurBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
<i>JAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JNTS</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	<i>Supplements to Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PL	Patrologia Latina
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>RBén</i>	<i>Revue bénédictine</i>
<i>REAug</i>	<i>Revue des études augustiniennes</i>
<i>RevScRel</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
<i>RHR</i>	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
<i>RSPT</i>	<i>Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques</i>
<i>RTL</i>	<i>Revue théologique de Louvain</i>
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
<i>SecCent</i>	<i>Second Century</i>
<i>StudBib</i>	<i>Studia Biblica</i>

TUGAL	<i>Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>
ZWT	<i>Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie</i>

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### A. Aim of the Book

The book of Revelation stands as one of the most fascinating yet enigmatic works from antiquity. Since the dawn of Christianity, scholars have grappled with the task of deciphering the intricate tapestry of terrifying and confusing imagery it presents. Even in the present day, Revelation continues to offer diverse interpretive avenues, with modern discussions spanning environmentalism, feminist perspectives, and post-colonial readings.<sup>1</sup>

This study focusses on the early Christian communities' interpretations of Revelation 19–21 during the early centuries, shedding light on the distinctive eschatological viewpoints within this text and emphasising a fertile but often overlooked literary context. I direct my attention to the reception of these chapters within Roman Africa, from the second to the fourth century.<sup>2</sup> Literature from this milieu is substantial, encompassing letters, treatises, commentaries, and many martyrological texts. By meticulously examining this material, we

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey on the state of this book in contemporary research: Scot McKnight, *The State of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). See also Russell S. Morton, *Recent Research on Revelation* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014); Jonathan Moo, "Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination: Science, Faith, and Ecological Responsibility," *Zygon* 50 (2015): 937–48; Micah D. Kiel and Barbara R. Rossing, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017). *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) offers reflections on Revelation within contemporary trends: Susan E. Hulen "Feminist Interpretation of Revelation," Thomas B. Slater, "Interpreting Revelation through African American Cultural Studies," Harry O. Maier, "Post-Colonial Interpretation of the Book of Revelation". Ian Boxall has recently proposed an examination of "very diverse 'readers' of the Apocalypse, in order to reflect upon the different patterns of interpretation they employ". ("The Apocalypse Unveiled: Reflections on the Reception History of Revelation," *ExpTim* 125 [2014]: 262).

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion provided by Karol Piotr Kulpa, *Tyconius' Theological Reception of 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022, 11–50). Kulpa decided to examine the hermeneutics of Tyconius within a "vision of its reception composed of historical, literary and theological levels" (*ibid.*, 30). Throughout my analysis of the reception of Revelation 19–21, I engage with this methodological guide, attempting to offer insights on the interpretation of Revelation in North African Christianity taking into account historical, literary, and theological perspectives.



gain profound insights into how early Christians engaged with the book of Revelation and how these interpretations helped shape their complex literary landscape. As recently underscored by Charles Hill, in his survey of Revelation's interpretations:

Naturally, Revelation played a formative role in the development of Christian eschatological thought, though the reading of Rev was never confined to eschatological interests, in the usual sense of the term. Christians always found the book to be full of ethical and Christological insight that informed the present life of churches and the discipleship of individuals.<sup>3</sup>

Revelation 19–21 provoked significant discussions concerning its eschatological dimension in antiquity, moulding the imagination of how the North African Christian communities thought about the “last things”. Moreover, the content of these chapters held a prominent place in the theology of martyrdom, making them a perfect case study for exploring the reception of the New Testament, and more broadly, the Bible's impact on societies. This research addresses several critical issues in current research. First of all, there is a dearth of studies on the exegesis of Revelation in the early Church (especially concerning the Western regions of the Roman Empire). With the exception of Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland's commentary,<sup>4</sup> few works offer a comprehensive chronological examination of its interpretation in the Christian communities.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Italian studies, although abundant in the field of Patristics, have been largely overlooked in contemporary scholarship. Hence, this research aims to illuminate significant contributions that have thus far gone unnoticed.

Another essential perspective of this research pertains to its subject matter. The path through the North African Christian communities will encompass not only Latin authors but also martyrdom accounts to calibrate the influence of the book of Revelation comprehensively. This affords us the opportunity to discern the impact of John's Apocalypse on these varied sources, identifying both substantial similarities and differences. In this vein, a chronological examination will be undertaken, treating early Christian authors' writings and martyrs' accounts without differentiation.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Hill, “The Interpretation of the Book of Revelation in Early Christianity,” in Koester, *The Oxford Handbook*, 733.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (London: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981) only takes into account Tyconius and Augustine. Recently, the articles of Martin Meiser, “Before Canonisation: Early Attestation of Revelation,” and Michael J. Kruger, “The Reception of the Book of Revelation in the Early Church,” in *Book of Seven Seals: The Peculiarity of Revelation, Its Manuscripts, Attestation, and Transmission*, ed. Thomas J. Kraus and Michael Sommer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 137–58 and 159–74, respectively. In relation to the communities of Roman Africa, Hill only talks about Tertullian and Tyconius (“The Interpretation of the Book of Revelation,” 730–61).

Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge that a comprehensive analysis of interpretation must necessarily involve an examination of the text. While critical editions serve as valuable tools, they present a constructed text that did not exist in antiquity. In this study, the matter is much more complicated since the authors were probably using a Latin translation of John's Apocalypse (though this is not always the case). Therefore, the text of Revelation 19–21 in these traditions will be considered, a necessary move as certain features introduce fresh perspectives on the most ancient text of this New Testament book. The tumultuous path to the canonisation of the book of Revelation had an unfortunate impact on the manuscript transmission, resulting in a limited number of direct witnesses surviving in comparison to other books within the New Testament corpus. This scarcity amplifies the challenges in reconstructing the text.<sup>6</sup> However, the textual investigation of Revelation 19–21 in the North African authors sheds new light on the earliest text of Revelation and its reception.

## B. Revelation 19–21: Context and Content

The book of Revelation closes the New Testament canon and it contains the narration of prophecies that the apostle John experienced on the isle of Pat-

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<sup>6</sup>“The Greek text of Revelation is preserved in 310 manuscripts. Seven are papyri, twelve are majuscules, and 291 are minuscules. Not all are available for inspection. 293 of the 310 are accessible. The earliest manuscripts are from the second (possibly) and third centuries. All are fragmentary. The earliest extant manuscript with the complete text of Revelation is the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus (S 01), shadowed by the fifth-century codices Alexandrinus (A 02) and Ephraemi Rescriptus (C 04), a palimpsest. The bulk of Revelation's Greek manuscripts stem from the tenth to sixteenth centuries. A few even reach into the nineteenth” (Juan Hernández Jr. “The Greek Text of Revelation,” in Koester, *The Oxford Handbook*, 342–60). A summary of the history of the research on the Greek text of Revelation can be found in id., *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse: The Singular Readings of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 10–28; Martin Karrer who provides a table of the tradition up until the 6th/7th century, “Der Text der Johannesapokalypse,” in *Die Johannesapokalypse: Kontexte – Konzepte – Rezeption / The Revelation of John: Contexts – Concepts – Reception*, ed. Jörg Frey, James A. Kelhoffer and Franz Tóth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 43–78, 58–60; David C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 227–32. Insights on the new challenges and the path towards the *Editio Critica Maior* of Revelation which should be coming out in 2024 can be found in Marcus Sigismund, Martin Karrer and Ulrich Schmid, eds., *Studien zum Text der Apokalypse* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2015), Marcus Sigismund, Darius Müller and Matthias Geigenfeind, eds., *Studien zum Text der Apokalypse II* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2017), Marcus Sigismund and Darius Müller, eds., *Studien zum Text der Apokalypse III* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2020).

mos.<sup>7</sup> These prophecies are presented in a complex, symbolic, and mirroring pattern, involving various symbols such as animals, numbers, colours, and more.

Revelation commences with seven letters addressed to the seven churches situated in the Roman province of Asia Minor. This book is traditionally dated to the time of the imperial reign of Domitian (81–96 CE),<sup>8</sup> although scholars have debated its dating, proposing earlier or later placements.<sup>9</sup> The focus of the present study is the analysis of the history of interpretation of Revelation 19–21. These chapters constitute one of the most disputed passages in the entire book of Revelation,<sup>10</sup> and narrate the Parousia of Christ, the millennium, and the descent of the holy city – the New Jerusalem – marking the eschatological culmination of the book.<sup>11</sup> The blood of the saints is finally avenged, the final battle is coming, and, after that, the faithful can enjoy the new kingdom. Although the primary focus is on the interpretation of Revelation 19–21, I would like to offer some reflections on the context of these chapters in the entire book.<sup>12</sup> In the concluding remarks, there will be the chance to compare

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<sup>7</sup> Attributed to John the apostle (see the detailed discussion in Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Yale: Yale University Press, 2014], 65–69). It is generally assumed that the author of the fourth Gospel and the book of Revelation is not the same person. See the discussion with an overview of the different hypotheses proposed by scholars in David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 54–56.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* V,30,3.

<sup>9</sup> See discussion in Koester, *Revelation*, 72–79. He concludes that: “Revelation was probably written during the final decades of the first century” (ibid., 79).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 741.

<sup>11</sup> For an insight into these chapters, see J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992); Jack T. Sanders, “Whence the First Millennium? The Sources Behind Revelation 20,” *NTS* 50 (2004): 444–56; R. J. McKelvey, “The Millennium and the Second Coming,” in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 85–100; Eke Wilfred Onyema, *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev 20,1–10): A Critical History of Exegesis with An Interpretative Proposal* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2013); Tobias Nicklas, “The Eschatological Battle According to the Book of Revelation: Perspectives on Revelation 19:11–21,” in *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Pieter De Vielliers (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012); Kevin E. Miller, “The Nuptial Eschatology of Revelation 19–22,” *CBQ* 60 (1998): 301–18; Thomas Johann Bauer, *Das tausendjährige Messiasreich der Johannesoffenbarung: Eine literarkritische Studie zu Offb 19,11–21,8* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2007); Jan A. Du Rand, “The Imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9–22:5),” *Neotestamentica* 22 (1988): 65–86.

<sup>12</sup> Bauer suggests that this section is a coherent sequence of events: “Bei der Auslegung ist als erstes zu berücksichtigen, dass der Vf. Off 19,11–21,8 als eine zusammengehörige Einheit intendiert hat, die er durch die parallelen Rahmenabschnitte 17,1–19,10 und 21,9–22,9 innerhalb seines Werkes klar abgegrenzt hat. Innerhalb des Abschnittes 19,11–21,8

scholarly interpretations with those provided by North African Christian communities.

It is worth noting that providing a clear structure for the book of Revelation has been challenging, and consensus remains elusive.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the section containing verses 19:11–22:5 is usually described as being the last and sixth cycle of visions:<sup>14</sup>

The sixth vision cycle marks the final phase of the conflict. Babylon has now fallen, but the beast, false prophet, and Satan remain. These destroyers must be defeated for the life-giving purposes of the Creator and the Lamb to be fully realized in the new creation. The other major theme is God's vindication of his people, which the heavenly elders also announced (11:18).<sup>15</sup>

Chapter 19 follows the fall of Babylon, described in chapter 18, and opens with a joyful hymn, emphasising that the blood of God's servants has been finally vindicated (v. 2). This is a response to the martyrs who pleaded for blood revenge in chapter 6.<sup>16</sup> In the subsequent verses we encounter the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures joining the multitude singing "Hallelujah" (vv. 4–7), and the announcement of the marriage feast between the lamb and his

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liegt – wie die Vor und Rückverweise in 20,3.7.10 erkennen lassen – eine klare Progression der einzelnen Ereignisse vor, von der der Vf. an keiner Stelle erkennbar abweicht" (*Das tausendjährige Messiasreich*, 348).

<sup>13</sup> Francis J. Moloney argues that: "There is no consensus concerning the literary structure of Rev 1:1–22:2" ("Tracing a Literary Structure in the Book of Revelation," *CBQ* 4 [2022]: 642). On this matter, see also Ugo Vanni, *La struttura letteraria dell'Apocalisse* (Rome: Herder, 1971), 19–99, Kenneth A. Strand, "Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 401–8.

<sup>14</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 741. A summary of this cycle is provided by Koester in *The Oxford Handbook*: "The sixth and final cycle (19:11–22:5) shows the outworking of God's justice through two overlapping themes: ridding the earth of its destroyers and bringing life through resurrection, making all things new. The defeat of the destroyers began when Babylon was destroyed by the beast in the previous cycle, and now continues as the beast and false prophet are overcome by the beast's opposite, Christ the Lamb. Here Christ is portrayed as a warrior, yet he comes in a robe already covered with blood – recalling scenes in which the Lamb's blood redeems people from every nation (19:13; cf. 5:9–10; 7:9–14). Christ's only weapon is the sword in his mouth, an image for his word, showing that the system based on falsehood is ultimately defeated by the power of truth (19:15, 21). Finally, Satan is confined to the abyss for a thousand years and then relegated to the lake of fire, permanently removing his destructive influence from God's world. The positive side of the Creator's justice emerges when those who have unjustly lost their lives because of their witness are resurrected to reign with Christ for a thousand years (20:4–6) and that trajectory continues when all people are raised for judgment, and death and Hades are relegated to the lake of fire. In God's new creation death is gone, the water of life flows, and the tree of life brings healing" (14).

<sup>15</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 750. See also Bauer, *Das tausendjährige Messiasreich*, 103–4.

<sup>16</sup> As noted by David Aune, "the verb ἐκδικεῖν occurs only here and in 6:10" (*Revelation 17–22* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 1025). See also Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 928.

bride, a reference to the eschatological New Jerusalem<sup>17</sup> (vv. 7–8). The final verse, expressing an angelic revelation (v. 10), is generally seen as a transition from the cycle that began with chapter 17 (focused on the judgment of Babylon) to the concluding sixth cycle of visions, which begins with verse 19:11.

The second section of chapter 19 involves the second coming of Jesus, portrayed as a riding warrior, and the destruction of the eschatological enemies. The vision starts with the opening of heaven (v. 11), where John sees a white horse, ridden by the one “called faithful and true”. Scholars are divided on whether this passage narrates the Parousia of Christ. In this regard, Aune comments:

There is general agreement among commentators that this pericope is a description of the return or Parousia of Jesus Christ. At the same time, this perspective is problematic because the pericope contains no features clearly derived from traditional early Christian conceptions of the Parousia of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

The portrayal of Jesus as an eschatological warrior is rich in details, drawing on imagery from the Old Testament. Jesus is pictured with eyes “like a flame of fire” (cf. also 1:16 and 2:18), wearing many diadems on his head (v. 12), draped in a robe dipped in blood (v. 13), and with a sharp sword coming out of his mouth. He is followed by an army on white horses. In the two following verses (vv. 17–18) an angel stands, summoning birds for “the great supper of God”, an allusion to the eschatological banquet (cf. Ezek 39:4.17–20).

Chapter 19 culminated with the defeat of the eschatological enemies. John first sees the enemy’s armies, followed by the capture of the beast and the false prophet, who are cast into the lake of fire, while the remaining enemies “were slain by the sword” (v. 21), a reference to the sword of Jesus mentioned earlier. As some scholars have pointed out, John describes the fate of the enemies, but there is no description of the battle. In this regard, Tobias Nicklas has suggested: “It is remarkable that the text does not give any attention to the depiction of the battle itself, but only to the fate on the rider’s opponents.”<sup>19</sup>

Chapter 20<sup>20</sup> is one of the most contentious sections of the entire book, chiefly due to the reference to the millenarian kingdom,<sup>21</sup> the meaning of which

<sup>17</sup> Ugo Vanni comments: “Nella fase pre-escatologica la chiesa, come *findanzata* impegnata nei suoi *atti di giustizia*, si confeziona l’abito che indosserà nella nuzialità piena della fase propriamente escatologica” (*Apocalisse di Giovanni* [Assisi: Cittadella editrice, 2018], 602).

<sup>18</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1046.

<sup>19</sup> Tobias Nicklas, “The Eschatological Battle,” 242.

<sup>20</sup> A scholarly discussion on Rev 20:1–10 is provided by Onyema, *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ*, 20–157.

<sup>21</sup> Many are the hypotheses proposed to explain the origin of the millenarian kingdom. McKelvey explains: “The idea of an interim messianic period features in Jewish apocalyptic

is still a *crux interpretum* among ancient and contemporary scholars. It is worth noting that the mention of the one-thousand-year kingdom is a *unicum* in the whole New Testament.<sup>22</sup> We left chapter 19 with the capture of the eschatological enemies, the beast, and the false prophet. Chapter 20 begins with the mention of the last enemy, the dragon – identified by John as the devil and Satan. An angel descends from heaven to bind the dragon with chains for a thousand years,<sup>23</sup> after which he will be “released for a little while” (v. 3).

During the time of Satan’s binding, the millennium of saints takes place (vv. 4–6). John sees “the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands”. The identity of these individuals has been debated, as Beale summarises:

They have been identified in at least five different ways. (1) They are martyrs who will assist God in the final judgment or (2) all God’s people assisting him in the judgment (cf. Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev 2:26-27; 19:14). (3) They are the angelic court of Daniel 7 who declare the final judgment against the Satanic fiend in vindication of the saints whom he oppressed [...]. (4) The court is composed of angels, but the angels represent saints. (5) The court includes exalted believers along with angels, since the same scene of figures (“elders”) sitting on heavenly thrones in Rev 4:4 included angels who corporately represent exalted saints.<sup>24</sup>

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(2 *Baruch* 39:7–40:3; 4 *Ezra* 7:28–29; cf. *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:36–39; *Sanhedrin* 99a) (“The Millennium,” 97). Ugo Vanni discusses the precedents of this idea in “Il millenarismo: parametrica per un discernimento cristiano alla luce di Apocalisse 20,1–10,” *Sette religioni* 1 (1991): 112–14. See also Sanders, “Whence the First Millennium? The Sources Behind Revelation 20,” *NTS* 50 (2004): 444–56, Clementina Mazzucco, “Il millenarismo Cristiano delle origini (II–III sec.),” in “*Millennium*” – *l’attesa della fine nei primi secoli cristiani: atti delle III Giornate Patristiche Torinesi; Torino 23–24 ottobre 2000* (Turin: Celid, 2002), 145–82. Aune provides an excursus on this topic in *Revelation 17–22*, 1104–8 with an extensive bibliography.

<sup>22</sup> Various are the perspectives on the millennium: “1) Some believe that the millennium will occur after the second coming of Christ. This view is traditionally known as premillennialism. 2) Postmillennialism has held that the millennium occurs toward the end of the church age and that Christ’s climactic coming will occur at the close of the millennium. 3) Others believe that the millennium started at Christ’s resurrection and will be concluded at his final coming” (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 973).

<sup>23</sup> Koester comments: “Together with the beast and false prophet, Satan lured the kings of the earth to Harmagedon (16:13–16), but their armies were annihilated and the beast and false prophet were captured. This left only Satan, who is now taken into custody” (*Revelation*, 783).

<sup>24</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 996. See also Koester, *Revelation*, 771.

The majority of scholars interpret those people as being martyrs, especially given the strong parallel to Rev 6:9,<sup>25</sup> where the martyrs under the altar sought vengeance for their blood. This passage thus could be seen as the answer to that claim. Martyrs are satisfied with vindication, and they finally reign with Christ for a thousand years.<sup>26</sup>

Another important point of discussion is the resurrection of the saints depicted in these verses. John distinguished between two resurrections: the first involving only martyrs (if this interpretation is correct) appears, and the second encompassing all the other people (implied in verses 12–13, where all people stand before the throne awaiting judgment). McKelvey concludes his article about the millennium with the following statement, which I think clarifies the situation of this passage:

The first resurrection in Revelation 20 must be the first of two physical resurrections which are separated by a thousand years. The first is a resurrection of the righteous, who will be raised at the Second Coming of Christ (Rev 20:4–6), and the second is a resurrection of the wicked (Rev 20:5a), who will be raised after the millennium to stand before the judgment of the great white throne (Rev 20:11–15). And between these two physical resurrections, King Jesus will reign upon the earth for a thousand years, just as pre-millennialism teaches.<sup>27</sup>

Another disagreement among scholars relates to the location of the millennium: is this happening in heaven or on the earth?<sup>28</sup> Both hypotheses are potentially valid and John is not explicit in setting this event, however, I am more convinced that John is situating it on the earth, as the New Jerusalem, which

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<sup>25</sup> See the comments of McKelvey: “The millennium is the millennium of the martyrs. 20:4–6 is in direct line with the many other references to the martyrs (6:9–11; 7:13–17; 11:4–13; 12:11–12; 14:1–5; 15:2–4)” (“The Millennium,” 97). Eugenio Corsini argues: “Tra i commentatori, specie tra i moderni, sono in molti a pensare che Giovanni ammetta una sola categoria di partecipanti al regno millenario, quella degli ‘uccisi ...’, uccisi appunto per non essersi prostrati ‘dinanzi alla bestia e alla sua statua’. Altri invece, soprattutto quelli di parte cattolica, non soltanto distinguono due categorie ma pensano che la seconda non sia costituita da martiri, ma da coloro che osservano fedelmente la legge di Dio” (*Apocalisse prima e dopo* [Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1993], 500).

<sup>26</sup> “The theological point of the millennium is solely to demonstrate the triumph of the martyrs: that those whom the beast put to death are those who will truly live – eschatologically, and that those who contested his right to rule and suffered for it are those who will in the end rule as universally as he – and for much longer: a thousand years!” (Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 107).

<sup>27</sup> McKelvey, “The Millennium,” 32. Corsini suggests: “La prima è parziale e riguarda soltanto i partecipanti al regno millenario; la seconda invece è universale e riguarda tutti i morti, senza eccezione” (*Apocalisse*, 509).

<sup>28</sup> McKelvey collocates it on the earth (“The Millennium,” 97–98).

descends from heaven.<sup>29</sup> After the thousand years of the reign of saints, there is the final battle. The devil previously bound is released and the force of God faces the enemy (with an explicit background of Ezek 38–39),<sup>30</sup> and the result is that the adversary is finally defeated (“the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever”, v. 10).

Scholars have noticed the similarities between this passage and the narration of the battle in 19:17–21, debating whether or not these two passages should be referred to the same event. As suggested by Aune, “It is difficult to reconcile the destruction inflicted on the nations described in 19:17–21 with the subsequent existence of nations at the four corners of the earth mentioned in 20:7–10, following the millenarian reign of Christ referred to in 20:4–6.”<sup>31</sup> Chapter 20 is concluded with the ultimate overcoming of evil forces: a general resurrection is implied and all people will stand in front of the throne waiting for their judgment (based on their deeds, through two sets of books) until the eternal punishment – the second death, in which “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire” (v. 15).

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<sup>29</sup> “John does not actually say whether his vision of the thousand-year reign of the saints takes place on earth or in heaven, which is surprising given the usual assumptions that are made about this passage. On the one hand, he may well be speaking of a kingdom on earth, since the scenes that follow refer to the opponents of God coming from the four corners of the earth to attack the saints, and they warn that fire will come down from heaven to destroy these enemies (20:7–10). On the other hand, the vision could refer to a heavenly kingdom, since John introduces it simply by saying that he ‘saw thrones,’ and in previous visions the throne of God and the thrones of the twenty-four elders were said to be located in heaven (4:2, 4; 11:16). Therefore, the thrones in 20:4 might be heavenly as well. In either case, noting John’s vagueness about the location is a helpful way to check speculation about the nature of the millennial kingdom” (Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 173).

<sup>30</sup> On this topic, Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38–39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19, 17–21 and 20, 7–10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Aune presents an overview of proposals of interpretation in *Revelation 17–22*, 1095. Beale discusses the matter, concluding that the two passages refer to the same event, which means that the final battle happened before the millennium (*The Book of Revelation*, 974–83 with discussion and bibliography). On the contrary, McKelvey stresses: “The two events (19:11–21 and 20:4–6) are viewed as forming a sequence: Christ returns to earth, Satan is locked up and Christ and the saints rule for one thousand years. This is known as premillennialism because the Second Coming takes place before the millennium. Although one hears little about premillennialism in scholarly circles today its principal features are still held by scholars, namely, 19:11–21 is the Parousia and it is followed chronologically by the millennium. It is a view which appears to follow the natural sequence of events in Rev 19 and 20. Moreover, it has the support of the great majority of early church fathers” (“The Millennium,” 85). See also the discussion provided by Corsini, *Apocalisse*, 481–87.



Chapter 21 marks God's final eschatological intervention in history, accompanied by its positive effects.<sup>32</sup> John witnesses the renewal of the world and a new creation ("a new heaven and a new earth", Rev 21:1), as the old world disappears (v. 1b).<sup>33</sup> Following this, the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, described as a bride, echoing the imagery of the Lamb's marriage in 19:7.<sup>34</sup> Scholars have emphasised the connection between these initial verses of chapter 21 and Old Testament prophecies,<sup>35</sup> particularly those found in the book of Isaiah. The new world and the new Jerusalem represent, as Corsini has pointed out, two significant moments in John's view; the fulfillment of Israel's promises and the new world began with Genesis.<sup>36</sup> The eschatological promises have been realised,<sup>37</sup> allowing God to dwell among his people, as stated in verses 3–4: "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people". With God now taking center stage in this new plan, the troubles of the old creation cease to exist, there are no tears, no death, no "mourning, nor crying, no pain". Subsequently,

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<sup>32</sup> "Il tema teologico di fondo è il rinnovamento messianico, attuato nella storia e nell'ambiente, giunto ormai alla sua piena realizzazione" (Vanni, *Apocalisse di Giovanni*, 650).

<sup>33</sup> Beale provides a rich discussion on the background of this idea (*The Book of Revelation*, 1050–51).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1039–46.

<sup>35</sup> Dave Mathewson concludes: "As with the other metaphors in 21.122.5, John reiterates prophetic hopes in order to express his own hope in the eschatological restoration of Jerusalem (Isa 65.19; 52.1; 54.11–12; Ezek. 48). As such it is the center of God's eschatological reign and the source of life and blessing. Yet John's interpretation of these texts has been filtered through their interpretation in apocalyptic expectations of a heavenly Jerusalem. Such a conception coheres with John's concern to present a radically new beginning with the establishment of the new heavens and earth. John also consistently read these traditions as primarily symbolizing the community itself. Therefore, the bride (cf. 19.7–8) is identified with the new Jerusalem (21.2), and the foundations (21.14) and precious stones (21.18–21) symbolically represent the members who constitute the restored eschatological community. The ubiquitous number twelve also points to the eschatological restoration of the people of God" (*A New Heaven and A New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1–22.5* [London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003], 218). See also Eric J. Gilchrest, *Revelation 21–22 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Utopianism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), and William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Homebush: Lancer, 1985).

<sup>36</sup> A scholarly discussion about verses 21:1–2 is provided by Koester, *Revelation*, 802–4.

<sup>37</sup> Corsini comments: "La nuova Gerusalemme rappresenta l'uscita dal deserto dove si svolge il pellegrinaggio d'Israele, ma rappresenta anche l'uscita da quell'altro deserto in cui si svolge il pellegrinaggio dell'umanità dopo la cacciata dall'Eden. In questo senso è da intendere la duplice serie di riferimenti scritturali che troviamo alla base della vasta allegoria che conclude l'*Apocalisse*; nel riscatto d'Israele, preannunziato dalle profezie messianiche, Giovanni vede il simbolo e, se si vuole, la 'primizia' del riscatto dell'umanità operato da Gesù Cristo" (*Apocalisse*, 520).

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